

Pentecost Sunday

May 23, 2021

“What Got Into Us?”

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b ~ Acts 2:1-21 ~ John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Do any of you remember those old American Express commercials? A “kinda-sorta” famous person would ask the question. “Do you know me? I’m so and so ... and I did such and such ... but nobody remembers my name... and that’s why I carry the American Express card.” Well, I was a representative at a UCC Pension Board Conference in Seattle one year. A number of local celebrities and dignitaries had been invited to the big fancy banquet that was held on the first night. People were socializing prior to being seated, and I didn’t know a soul there, so I was standing off to one side looking over the crowd. A young reporter from the “Seattle Times” walked up to me ... stared at me kind of funny, and said, “Who are you? Are you somebody important?” How do you answer that? Well, I don’t know what got into me, but I held out my hand to him, and said, “Hi! I’m Dolly Parton. Nice to meet you.”

Have you ever done anything so out of character, so completely different from your normal way, that you found yourself at odds to explain it and the only explanation you could make was that it wasn’t really you ... something else came upon you from the outside ... something else took hold of you and made you act the way you did.

I can remember a purchase or two John and I made that we later came to question ... like the new puppy which we eventually loved like a child, but did hundreds of dollars of damage to our home and irritated our neighbors no end ... so that every once in a while ... or more like once a week ... one of us would say to the other, “What were we thinking? What got into us that we bought a howling, seemingly untrainable dog to live in our home? We might as well have let a family of raccoons move in!”

One summer we drove to Tampa for General Synod with a stop at Disney World beforehand. Just us two old coots ... riding all the rides ... eating all the over-priced junk food we could find ... laughing ourselves silly as we got drenched to the bone in a downpour. We acted like a couple of teen-agers and we woke up on our last morning saying, “What got into us that we had so much fun ... and felt so young-and-in-love again ... and why don’t we do that more often?”

“What got into us?” those 1st century Christians must have wondered aloud when they spoke about the day of Pentecost, and the days that followed. “We were so excited. Sure, there was that sound like a mighty rushing wind and flames that seemed to leap in the air above our heads.

And when we talked about what God had done among us everyone understood as if we were speaking their own language. But it was more than that. What got into us that all the usual barriers between people fell away?”

“Folks from different nations shared their suppers. Women stood up and preached as if it were normal. Rich and poor sat next to each other. We covered the whole city and went out to the surrounding villages to find people who hadn’t heard the good news yet because we wanted the joy of being the first to tell them. It was contagious! We were so united in our affection for one another ... it was nothing for us to sell our things to help someone who was struggling. We felt so alive ... so full of joy ... so energized that people thought we were drunk with new wine. What got into us?”

Well, they were drunk with new wine ... the new wine of communion ... the new wine of the gospel ... the new wine of God’s presence intoxicated them. They were under the influence of God’s Spirit. Of course, this was before anyone had written the gospels and letters and apocalypses so there was no arguing yet over what the scriptures really said. This was before they wrote by-laws and constitutions and books of discipline ... or set up any rules about who could and who couldn’t be ordained to be the official preachers of God’s truth. This was before they set up committees and adopted Robert’s Rules of Order and joined together in cliques and factions to force their way upon every else. This was before they erected mammoth cathedrals with massive doors to shut some people out. This was even before they had lists of sins that they could use to disqualify some people from thinking that they might “catch the Spirit” too. Everything was so new ... everybody was so new ... that they just didn’t know any better than to invite every person they met to be a part of the joyful people of God.

What happened at Pentecost was the kind of miracle where they knew that the things happening among them were not natural to them ... not normal to their way ... not something that could be planned ... they were an act of God. It came to them from the outside ... from some place beyond ... from someone more than anyone of them ... or all of them together. It was what they expected ... only more. It was what the prophets had foretold ... only more. It was what Jesus had promised ... only more. “What got into us?” they asked out loud ... but they knew the answer already ... “What got into us was the Spirit of God.”

What are the signs that the Spirit of God is here ... that the Spirit of Pentecost is the Spirit of Oakland Christian United Church of Christ? The second chapter of Acts is long, so we usually don’t read the end of the Pentecost story, but it reveals the clearest way to tell that the Spirit is in our midst. It says:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

So, as glorious as it is, it's not the style of music that we sing. It's not measured by the size of our Bibles or by the length of my sermons (Praise God!) It's what happens inside us when we gather for worship. It's what happens among us in our relationships. It's what happens as we take up the mission Christ gave us ... to preach the good news in word and deed ... to include all persons in our community of care ... to reach out to all with acts of mercy and kindness and justice.

By those measures we can rejoice in the signs of the Spirit that we see in this church all the time. God said, "Will you treat women as spiritual equals?" You said, "Yes!" God said, "Will you support my beloved across the world?" You said, "Yes!" God said, "Will you feed the hungry ... clothe the naked ... visit the sick and the homebound ... welcome the stranger ... show mercy to the despised and rejected ... visit the prisoner ... lift up the brokenhearted ... forgive the fallen? Will you be the beloved community of God?" You said, "Yes!" God said, "Will you love each other through it all? Will you be Christ to each other?" You said, "Yes!"

Those are the signs of the Spirit. You know the signs of the Spirit here ... we lift them up each fall as part of our stewardship message ... things like our Flock groups, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, OCWM, CAPS Night Stay, Meals on Wheels, scholarships for our youth, Friends of Barnabas, benevolences for the needy ... they are far too numerous to mention here. Those are the signs of the Spirit.

But I must mention many other signs of the Spirit among us today. The calling that God has given us ... step by step for almost 150 years ... to open the doors ... and the full communion of the church ... to all races, genders, and economic classes ... to all the diverse humanity God created. This is not a natural human gesture. Humans are naturally tribal and keep closely to their own kind. But our church has been pushed by the Spirit to find the unity of God's presence in the diverse human family ... and that is a sure sign to me of God's Spirit at work. In the time I have been here I have witnessed extraordinary acts of forgiveness, kindness, generosity, and love that I believe could only have come from God. I have seen people change their minds, change their behavior, be healed from old wounds, from addictions, from

unbearable sorrows. I have seen people grow and move out of their comfort zones to care for lost and lonely souls, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, to talk to their neighbors, to welcome the stranger.

The Holy Spirit is the invisible presence of the powerful Creator and Lover of the universe. The Holy Spirit is the risen Christ among us. We cannot see God with our eyes, but like the wind moving through the trees we can see where God has been ... where God is working ... how God has changed people by loving them. The Holy Spirit shows us who we are becoming ... what we are doing in the name of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is not a substance, but a presence. "Holy Spirit" is what we call the variety of ways that we encounter the invisible, mysterious presence of the eternal God within ... and among ... and around us. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the still, small voice of prayer ... giving comfort and reassurance. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the *discomforting* voice of conscience ... causing conflict and confrontation ... and what the old-timers used to call "conviction of sin." Sometimes the Holy Spirit is a guiding force ... giving challenge ... calling and pushing us past the boundaries of our prejudice and fear.

"Holy Spirit" is the name we give to the evidence that God is with us. Like Moses on Mount Sinai, we cannot see God ... only the glory that lingers where God has passed. Like the wind Jesus told Nicodemus to consider ... we cannot see God, but we feel the push ... we see the signs that show that the Spirit is working. The moving tree is not the wind itself ... but evidence that the wind is blowing. Moving *people* are the signs of the Spirit. And at Pentecost the evidence is clear ... the sound like a mighty rushing wind ... tongues of fire ... people gathering ... people preaching ... people responding to the good news. Each understanding the message in his or her own language.

So, let us rejoice in God's presence among us today. Let us allow the work of the Spirit to flourish among us because God has taken hold of us. Let us recognize that every day is Pentecost as we love all people in the name of Christ Jesus.

May we pray?

Creating God, Loving Christ, Living Spirit ... move among us today like a gentle breeze that refreshes us. Move among us like a gale that fills our souls and send us forward in your mission. Move against us like a hurricane that knocks down the walls of resistance that we build to defy your will. And let your Spirit be evident in the way that lives are changed in your name. Amen.